

FIELD



FIELD



# FIELD

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C.D. WRIGHT

*A FIELD SYMPOSIUM*



## C.D. WRIGHT: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

When C.D. Wright died unexpectedly this past January, American poetry lost one of its most innovative and crucial voices. In a career of over forty years she brought incisive intelligence, passionate curiosity about the world, and a fearless sense of experiment to bear on a remarkable variety of subjects; what remained constant in her work was its exactitude about language and its radically democratic vision. Her 2005 manifesto *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* starts with the following declaration: "I believe in a hard-headed art, an unremitting, unrepentant practice of one's own faith in the word in one's own obstinate terms. I believe the word was made good from the start; it remains so to this second.... There is not much poetry from which I feel barred, whether it is arcane or open in the extreme. I attempt to run the gamut because I am pulled by the extremes. I believe the word used wrongly distorts the world." Those principles are central to her writing in all of its forms.

Wright's first major volume, *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues* (1982), is deeply grounded in the hills of Arkansas where she was raised; its subjects are rural and domestic, its voices equally vernacular and mysterious. By the time of her next book, *Further Adventures with You* (1986), she'd left Arkansas, lived in San Francisco and Mexico, and begun teaching in Rhode Island, and her frame of reference had accordingly shifted. As she said in the preface to that volume, she was "no longer committed to pursuing a course whereby my language is rife with *idiom Ozarkia*.... While I prefer cornbread crumbled in buttermilk to sushi, I do not write from my lost life alone, any more than I dictate every term by which I do write." In the subsequent decades her work continued to evolve, as she produced book-length poems, collaborations with visual artists, essays, memoirs, and documentary/visionary collages focused on mass incarceration, Southern culture, and the Civil Rights Movement. The formal variety is staggering, but even more impressive is her lifelong commitment to moral clarity, social justice, and the sort of urgent empathy that great art can engender. "I poetry," she wrote. "I write it, study it, read it, edit it, publish it, teach it.... Sometimes I weary of it. I could not live without it."

FIELD was fortunate to have had a long, productive relationship with Wright and her work. We began publishing her poems in 1977 and frequently thereafter; we reviewed the 1982 and 1986 collections; and she contributed valuably to our symposia on Randall Jarrell (1986), W.S. Merwin (1997), and Jean Valentine (2005). The following essays respond to poems from the range of her career, from *Translations of the Gospel* to the most recent, *ShallCross*; more broadly, they represent the esteem and affection in which she is held by countless American poets and readers.

## FALLING BEASTS

Girls marry young  
In towns in the mountains.  
They're sent to the garden  
For beets. They come to the table  
With their hair gleaming,  
Their breath missing.  
In my book love is darker  
Than cola. It can burn  
A hole clean through you.  
When the first satellite  
Flew over, men stood  
On their property, warm  
Even in undershirts,  
Longing to shoot something.  
The mule looks down  
The barrel of the gun,  
Another long row to plow.  
Bills pile up in fall  
Like letters from a son  
In the army. An explosion  
Kills a quiet man.  
Another sits beside a brass lamp  
In a white shirt  
And cancels his pay.  
A thousand dulcimers are carved  
By the one called Double Thumb.  
Winter cuts us down  
Like a coach. Spits snow.  
Horses flinch  
Against the cold spurs in the sky.  
We look for the oak  
Who loves our company  
More than other oaks.  
The loveliest beds  
Are left undone.  
Hope is a pillow  
Hold on.

TOUGH AND TENDER: THE SPEAKER AS MENTOR  
IN "FALLING BEASTS"

Carolyn Wright could be a tough teacher. She loved to tell an anecdote in which Flannery O'Connor was asked whether the university kills writers. "It doesn't kill nearly enough," O'Connor supposedly said.<sup>1</sup> When I submitted my first poem in an undergraduate poetry workshop (it was the second I'd taken with Carolyn), she didn't provide the expected feedback noting strengths and areas for improvement. Instead she rewrote the poem almost beyond recognition and presented her version and mine side by side in class. This was on the first day of the workshop. Afterward we walked out of the room together, and she turned to me and asked kindly, in her soft Ozark accent, "Are you mad?" While she was no coddler of her students, she also had a rich supply of empathy. She valued vulnerability. The epigraph to her book *String Light*, a line from W.S. Merwin, reads, "If I were not human I would not be ashamed of anything."

I met C.D. in the winter of 1984, her second semester at Brown. It was the spring semester of my junior year. I'd just returned from studying in France and was frantically seeking entry into her poetry workshop after having been turned down for a workshop in fiction. It was late in the registration period, and options for classes were dwindling. I climbed several flights of stairs to find her office and speak with her before the end of her hours. She turned from her desk and looked up as if startled. Her appearance was the same as in the black and white photo on the back cover of *Further Adventures with You*. She'd just turned thirty-five, but she looked a little younger. Her manner seemed shy at first. Her words, not many, came out in a gentle southern voice. She was different from any of the other professors in my classes at Brown. I wasn't sure what to expect from her. She read one poem of mine and agreed to let me into the workshop. I think it was an act of kindness in response to my pleading.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm quoting Wright's version of this story from "Argument with the Gestapo Continued: II," p. 81. In fact, the actual verb in the question and in O'Connor's reply was "stifle," not "kill."



C.D. showed confidence in the classroom even in those early teaching years. It must have come in part from her hard-earned experience as a youngish writer and small-press publisher. She also drew on her extensive and eclectic reading in contemporary poetry, much of it published by small presses. She had authority, too, from another kind of life experience. While she didn't gush about her personal history—and certainly not in the classroom—I knew that she had participated in the Civil Rights and antiwar movements; that while growing up, she'd struggled against the norms of her Ozarks community. I knew that not too many years earlier she'd suffered the trauma of Frank Stanford's suicide. (In the first long poem seminar that she taught, in the spring of 1985, one day our small group discussed Stanford's *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*. When C.D. and I sat alone after class, she said, "It still hurts.") She was a survivor. It was a time of hopeful beginnings: she had gotten the position at Brown and recently had married Forrest Gander.

Carolyn became my mentor and remained a dear friend throughout my life. When asked to write about a favorite poem of hers, I found myself returning to her first books and recalling my earliest reactions to certain poems. As I winnowed my selections, I realized that the ones that had the greatest resonance were ones I think of as mentoring poems. These are poems that held special meaning for me when I was a young adult. To this day, certain lines have stayed in my mind like talismans. I will focus on "Falling Beasts," from her first book, to illustrate my sense of C.D.'s mentoring voice. This voice comes to us through the tough and tender speaker who addresses readers in this early poem.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For interested readers, there is a mentoring poem in C.D.'s second full-length collection, *Further Adventures with You* (1986), that I read as a companion to "Falling Beasts." Entitled "Nothing to Declare," it has in common with "Falling Beasts" moments when the speaker interrupts a narrative to address the reader. I first read "Nothing to Declare" in *FIELD*, where it was published in 1984.



"Falling Beasts" appears in *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues* (1982). It embodies the book's concerns with desire, violence, and lost innocence. Though themes and narrative strategies connect the poems in *Translations*, it is the poet's voice that unifies the collection. C.D.'s voice is unflinching throughout. The persona in "Falling Beasts" is one who has lived and suffered, who has toughened but hasn't become entirely cynical.

The speaker takes us on a disturbing tour of an archetypal mountain town that I take to be in the Ozarks. C.D. gives the town a mythic quality, even as she provides local specificity in some imagery and diction. While the poem's opening suggests an accessible narrative, it moves quickly into a strategy of accumulating images that readers must piece together through imaginative leaps. "Girls marry young / In towns in the mountains," it begins. But the narrative has no conventional middle or end. Readers must make a nonlinear connection between the opening and lines in the middle section such as

Bills pile up in fall  
Like letters from a son  
In the army. An explosion  
Kills a quiet man.  
Another sits beside a brass lamp  
In a white shirt  
And cancels his pay.

The poem operates by a strategy of association that helps us to recreate the town and the events in its people's lives. Details like the accumulating bills evoke for us the effects of the war on lives at home. (In the book's context, the war is Vietnam.) The coldness in the anonymous bureaucrat's voiding of the quiet man's pay contrasts shockingly with the impact the reader imagines on the dead man's parents and likely his wife (one of the girls who married young). I read the explosion as taking place in Vietnam, as suggested by the proximity to the son in the army (introduced in the simile). I also can imagine the explosion taking place at a dangerous job where workers' lives are worth nothing.

Early on, the speaker breaks in, disrupting the narrative about the girls to address the reader with the authority of hard-edged experience. The voice is unmistakable:

In my book love is darker  
Than cola. It can burn  
A hole clean through you.

Here the speaker begins to take a more prominent role as the reader's seasoned guide in this world that hovers between reality and legend. Anyone expecting a pretty story about a quaint southern town is jarred awake by the directness of the colloquial diction and the synesthesia of the metaphoric cola's burning darkness. The bitter three-line revelation casts a forbidding light on the story of the love-struck girls: we are seeing them at the moment before they are to lose their innocence. The moment before their fate is sealed. This is a voice that understands the irresistible pull and the disregard for consequences that characterize being in love. The colloquialisms "In my book" and "clean through you" further suggest that the speaker is both an insider and an outsider. Perhaps she has left a town like the one described, giving her the detachment to render it so unsparingly.

At the end of the poem the speaker addresses readers more directly in the memorable lines "Hope is a pillow / Hold on." Suddenly, readers become more personally implicated in the poem, as if the speaker sees us in all of our vulnerability. One certainly could read the lines as addressed to the speaker herself, or to the girls in the poem. But I've always responded as if they were addressed to me. The pillow metaphor is apt for anyone who has experienced heartbreak and hopelessness. We take to our beds, literally or figuratively. A pillow is tangible; it is soft and comforting. But what makes the ending so powerful is the emphatic "Hold on." There's an immediacy in the reassuring call not to let go. The speaker has additional authority because we've already learned that she, too, has been wounded by love.

The shift toward the reader at the end of "Falling Beasts" actually starts five lines earlier, with the poem's second instance of the first-person plural:

We look for the oak  
Who loves our company  
More than other oaks.

These lines describe what “we” do in response to the world described in all of the lines preceding. Readers can universalize this response to our own worlds of struggle. Through the use of “we,” the speaker includes herself and shows us resilience. She’s saying, simply, that we seek out a partner who loves us and enjoys us for who we are. The specific choice of the oak tree also suggests a mate with strength, solidity, and dependability.

Perhaps the turn toward a more direct involvement of the reader starts even earlier, with the first use of “us”: “Winter cuts us down / Like a coach....” Here the speaker again includes herself in the unconventional narrative. I think these lines are best read in light of a progression of seasonal archetypes in the poem. It begins in spring, when beets are in season. Then it moves into summer, when men are “warm / Even in undershirts.” I can’t identify a specific reference to autumn, and I don’t want to apply this archetypal frame with too heavy a hand. But read in this light, the violent entrance of winter divides the rest of the poem from what has come before, just as death creates a breakpoint in our lives. Of course the poem doesn’t end with death because the four lines about winter precede the lines about seeking an oak, with their wish for a new love. Trees grow new leaves in spring. In this context the final four lines look toward a rebirth.<sup>3</sup>

The two pairs of aphoristic lines that end “Falling Beasts” are among a collection of quotes from C.D. that regularly drift into my consciousness. They’ve stayed with me since I first read them in my early twenties. I’ve already spoken of the last two lines, “Hope is a pillow / Hold on.” When I was young, I carried these lines in my head and took from them fortitude for the struggle that awaits those

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<sup>3</sup> In a further development of this archetypal reading, Desirée Alvarez recently observed to me that the beds at the end of the poem might suggest not only lovers’ beds but also garden beds. She further points out that the girls fall from the garden. It is not too big a leap therefore to consider a reference to the Garden of Eden.



with whom Wright's sympathies resided: artists, activists, and others who don't fit easily in a world in which "the shark ethic prevails: eat the wounded" (Wright, "Argument with the Gestapo" 83-84). Then and now I hear in these lines encouragement and reassurance from someone a little older than me who's faced a similar struggle. The penultimate pair of lines reads, "The loveliest beds / Are left undone." These words of course set up the final lines' metaphor of the pillow. But they, too, resonate for me beyond the poem. I imagine passionate lovers who don't bother to make the bed because they know they'll return so soon. I also hear the lines as a gentle reminder not to seek perfection. (Sometimes it's better not to make your bed.)

\*

C.D. staunchly defended creative and idealistic pursuits that often are devalued in our society. In "hills" she identifies generationally with the longing to live the "integrated life," a life of commitment in which one's work and one's "positions" organically fit together (12). She continually sought strategies for achieving this goal, for herself and for her like-minded students. She offered related thoughts in an important essay published in 1987. "Argument with the Gestapo Continued: II" is the second of two similarly titled essays on the subject of "literary resistance."<sup>4</sup> In it she discusses the desire of many in her generation to choose alternatives like writing poetry above "law, medicine, banking, engineering, physics and other manly, predatory arts..." (83). She notes that she and her peers, her "tribe," also "infected other areas of the population with similar yearnings." Though she mourns the failure of her generation's aspirations, she says, "the tribe has earned the right to be proud of our resistance..." (83). In fact, the essay does not accept defeat, as it cites hopeful examples of contemporary poets who have joined together in various sites and media to revive the art.

I've spoken mostly about the effects of C.D.'s mentoring, in poems and in life, on my younger self. But now I am rereading her

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpts from this essay, with some alterations, are scattered in Wright's *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2005).

poems three decades later. When I was her student I was moved by a line that I felt evoked C.D.'s own history and the losses she had suffered: "The past is a deep place. I know" ("Listening to a Brown-Eyed Man Play It For Somebody Else"). The statement "I know" carried the authority of experience. Now, in my early fifties, I am claiming this line for myself as I look back on my own past and grieve the loss of my mentor and friend. What's remarkable is that C.D. wrote these words when she was no older than thirty.<sup>5</sup>

I miss C.D. The hurt from her death is still fresh. But I find her again in her writing and welcome her mentorship once more. In "Our Dust," a poem from *String Light*, C.D. writes, "...I / agreed to be the poet of one life, / one death alone...." Yet years later she titled her much-lauded documentary long poem *One with Others*. It recounts an incident in the civil rights struggle in Arkansas in the late 1960s. At the book's center is her own mentor, Mrs. Vittitow, or "V." One with others. The phrase fits C.D.'s character, the kind of mentor she was: always with you, not above or apart from you. More tender than tough.

I would like to thank Desirée Alvarez and Josna Rege for their help in completing this essay.

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- . "hills." *Further Adventures with You*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon UP, 1986. 9-12.

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<sup>5</sup> The poem appeared in Wright's chapbook *Terrorism* in 1979. Wright turned thirty in January of that year. A note on punctuation in the quoted lines: in the version of the poem in *Translations*, a period is omitted after "know," creating an enjambment with lines that follow. But one still can read the line as a sentence on its own. In the earlier version in *Terrorism*, there is a period after "know."

## CLOCKMAKER WITH BAD EYES

I close the shop at six. Welcome wind,  
weekend with two suns, night with a travel book,  
the dog-eared sheets of a bed  
I will not see again.

I not of time, lost in time  
learned from watches—  
a second is a killing thing.

Live your life. Your eyes go. Take your body  
out for walks along the waters  
of a cold and loco planet.

Love whatever flows. Cooking smoke, woman's blood,  
tears. Do you hear what I'm telling you?

BRIGHTER IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

In the days after I'd learned of C.D. Wright's death, I thought I was remembering some final lines from one of her poems. I wasn't. I was *misremembering* some final lines from one of her poems. The lines, from "Crescent" (a prose poem) are "draw nearer my dear: never fear: the world spins nightly toward its brightness and we are on it."

In my memory, mistaken, of that poem, the world was spinning *nightly toward its darkness and we are on it*.

It changes everything, of course, and not for the better. My mistake snatched the comfort from the poem, its message of hope, the whole exquisite honoring of light, really, and then especially the genuine and blessedly non-ironic memorandum: "never fear."

Despite the title of this essay (which I stole from a review of various television sets, a review I found on the internet while in the business of shopping for a new one), I do not think that darkness would improve this poem. But I feel C.D. Wright might approve of, understand, my mental misprint upon learning of her death. It was not, as it might seem, a negativistic revision brought on by the news, I don't think, but a new kind of comfort brought on by the sense of her ongoingness. The world is spinning, still, toward the brightness despite the darkness. The car is starting, the door is unlocking, without any need of a key. The brilliance, unconstrained. Her wild aliveness, freed. Now, an even more powerful sense of her poetry (which was never *matter*, always weightless and limitless—in every way making all borders crossable, all walls penetrable) being, and having been, dependent on nothing.

Reviewers have written quite a lot about the power of what's left unsaid in C.D. Wright's poetry. Indeed, it's one of her greatest gifts to us: the suggestion of more, of that which lies beyond words. She lets us continue to have no words for certain experiences and understandings that would be diminished by words. It's a kind of sacrifice, that gesture, she makes for the reader and the universe, being a poet so much in love with words ("I love them all," she tells us)—to allow for that which can't be said. To get so close to the hard fact



of a thing that she could have had owned it, and then to let it go. To give it back to the universe, or to the subconscious, or to the before and after that we are never allowed to see but which is there, embracing us at all times, and without substance. Made of mind. She accepted this. She let it be what it is. Nurtured that.

"Clockmaker with Bad Eyes" is one of the poems that taught me *how one might poetry*. That's the only way I can think to express what that poem, and the whole of the book in which I read it, *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues*, taught me. I read it when I was a sophomore in college, back when I was even more of a confused and half-formed creature than I am now. Back when I thought poetry was about expressing something, instead of searching for it. Feeling one's way in the dark towards the something, while creating it, intuiting it, without needing or wanting to slap the light switch and look at its simulacrum.

Those poems showed me that we never really *see* anything. And that, when we do, it is less than what it is, a misinterpretation, a husk no longer containing what its implications might have been if we hadn't taken that shortcut. Nothing that counts is corporeal. Brightness isn't always better.

"Clockmaker with Bad Eyes" was the first poem I looked for when I got *Steal Away*, to make sure that it was among the selected of her *selected and new poems*. There it was, still speaking to me, twenty years later. "Love whatever flows." By then, that directive meant something entirely different to me. Thirteen years later, now, with the poet's death on my mind, it means something else once again. "Live your life."

The seconds are killing us, yes. Everything goes. But there's another kind of clarity for the clockmaker, isn't there, after his eyes go? I always felt that it was the clockmaker telling me to take my body out for walks. That it is the clockmaker who sees, or saw, how cold and crazy it is, this world. I can see an argument for a shift in voice and point of view there, that the poet or some "speaker" has taken over for the clockmaker perhaps, has used the clockmaker as an example to back up the argument for living and seeing while you still can. But I know that the clockmaker will not only never see the

“dog-eared sheets of a bed” because of his<sup>1</sup> blindness, but because by the second stanza he is “lost in time.” He’s speaking to us so urgently, because he’s left us. His wisdom comes from his new omniscience. By the second stanza, he’s no longer a physical presence. Time has taken that. He’s a clockmaker; he knows all about time. After he’s “lost in time,” instead of chained to it, he must be channeled through the poet to bring these words to us. Therefore, he doesn’t need to be alive himself any longer to urge us on. Still, this is not your “stop to smell the roses” bit of advice. There are tears, too. Love them.

On a few occasions, I met C.D. Wright. These were occasions that usually took place just before or after she did a reading. She was surrounded by admirers. I was one of them. It was crowded. Then, she sent me, a summer ago, an email I printed up and will always treasure because it came from her. I wrote back. I hope my response conveyed to her how much her work meant to me. I wanted one day to tell her how much this poem meant and continues to mean to me. But I thought there would be time.

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<sup>1</sup> I realize that the clockmaker’s gender isn’t specified in this poem: I just always pictured him, myself, as an elderly gentleman.

## BLAZES

*for the ones shaving without a mirror*

A man came home with my brothers.  
He had on a hunting vest,  
A bird losing blood and feathers from the pouch.  
I thought of a burning bush.

It was raining again,  
Someone driving nails in a board.

I brushed the folds out of the tablecloth.  
The visitor stood in the steam  
Lifting off the table.  
He wiped his hands on my apron.

The voice of my father came on  
Gentle as a lamp  
A page being turned in its light.

They pushed their plates away, took their chair to the front room,  
And lit up. I went to mine.  
It was a school night. I held my pillow to my chest  
And said Kiss me Frankie.

I was old enough  
To know love is blind as the old woman  
Pulled down the hall by her dog.

Their guns leaned against the wall  
But men in those days kept themselves armed  
In the dark and rain.

It never stopped.  
Everyone who could handle an oar  
Headed for hell in a boat.

I thought of a burning bush.

The story not told by the one cooking supper  
Was heard by the fire.

FIRE AND WATER

One of many things I admire about C.D. Wright's work is the way she integrates large mysteries into the (necessarily) smaller lives to which her poems bear witness. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues*. Among my favorite poems in the book is "Blazes," which abounds with both mystery and clarity. I will comment mainly on the version in that 1982 book and then visit a later version included in the 2002 *Selected and New* collection.

The first seven lines are end-stopped, giving the poem a deliberately dulled quality—thudding, driven like the "nails into a board" of line six. Nails into wood is how one builds something, and the poem assembles itself from basic elements: home, man, blood, food, dark, light. That both diction and sentence structure are simple suggests a childlike point of view. But "Blazes" is no lullaby.

The one enjambment in the first three stanzas tells us of "steam / Lifting off the table"—a comforting image, given the stark quality of the images up to this point. Its warmth seems to be undercut, however, when the man wipes his hands on the speaker's apron. On first reading, this seems crude—he's treating her like a towel rack.

But that is not the speaker's reaction. Her response, signaled by two more enjambments, informs the next three lines, the sweetest in the poem: a memory of a gentle father, so clear and luminous in the speaker's mind that his voice throws light from the past onto the ungentle present. Father/lamp/page are a mid-poem oasis of light and calm in an otherwise dark scene.

The speaker is more clearly revealed when she is alone in stanza five, the brothers and the man having gone to the front room to light up (in their non-illuminating way). Her age has been somewhat indeterminate, but now with the phrase "school night," along with her attraction toward someone named Frankie—probably but not certainly the visitor downstairs—she's most likely in early adolescence. Just as "Blazes" is not a lullaby, the speaker is no child.

She is, in fact, "old enough to know," in stanza six, that love is yet another burden, not a form of rescue, and the image of the old woman and dog is darkly comical. It's as if the speaker has grown a



little older just across the stanza break. One would have to grow up quickly in such an environment. Her isolation is intense and overdetermined: gender, geography, family, even weather (a flood) conspire to trap her. When the visitor comes, hopes might be raised that he represents a connection to something beyond the dark, cold home, but he turns out to be cut from the same cloth as the brothers and becomes indistinguishable from them.

In stanza seven the narrative distance in time increases. The phrase “in those days” suggests that the speaker is looking back at this time and its great difficulties. And at the men. The poem is dedicated to “the ones shaving without a mirror”: among the ordinary dangers of this lonely place is a blade against the throat.

By stanza eight the poem considers escape: “Everyone who could handle an oar / Headed for hell in a boat.” Apparently hell is preferable to this place; apparently there is no third choice.

In the Biblical story the burning bush is miraculous in that it burns but is not consumed by the flames. God speaks from it, calling upon Moses to lead his people out of oppression. The bush that frames the poem (in line four and in the one-line penultimate stanza) is different. It does not speak; it listens. For the story has no language, only signs. The three words spoken aloud, “Kiss me Frankie,” are said by the speaker to herself in an otherwise empty room. The brothers are silent; the visitor has no words, either, only a shot bird, a bleeding trophy of survival.

Not only are there no words, those human tools of self-reflection, but in symbolic parallel there are also no mirrors, as the dedication has established. The lack of self-image is clear in the last stanza, in which the speaker refers to herself in the third person. She’s “the one,” a solitary being, surrounded by silent others who do not listen or speak. In the world of this poem, it is miracle enough that the fire listens. It listens to a story of oppression, human and otherwise. And keeps burning. Like the rain, the fire “never stopped.”

What is being built, board by board, line by line? The story is not told. Only the fire, the mystery in our lives, hears it.

Twenty years after this poem was published in *Translation of the Gospel Back into Tongues*, Wright included a revised version in *Steal Away: Selected and New Poems*. Some changes are minor—in step with

the times, she dropped the initial capitalization of lines, and there's a stanza break between lines three and four—but other changes have more important effects.

One is in the stanza that begins with the line "They pushed their plate away, took their chair to the front room." In the earlier version "plates" is plural and "chair" singular, something I found odd. With both words in the singular, the merging of visitor and brothers that I've already described is even more clear.

The most noticeable change, however, is that the last stanza has been deleted. The later version ends with the single-line stanza "I thought of a burning bush." Gone is "the one cooking supper," "the story not told," gone the listening fire. This is hardly as radical a revision as Marianne Moore's famous reduction of "Poetry," but it does, to my mind, change the poem significantly.

In the earlier version, the flames are literal as well as Biblical: the fire that the one at the end of the poem uses to prepare supper is, we can infer, in a cookstove or fireplace. The link between the speaker's physical surroundings and her imagination is intact. Without the final stanza, the poem's closing image is only the burning bush of the Biblical story. It has lost its local connection near "the one," its mysterious distinction of being able to listen.

It is of course true that we readers don't always like revisions made to poems we've already loved for decades. Having met the longer version first, I cannot "unread" the stanza or delete it from my memory.

That said, either version of "Blazes" is a superb portrait, its imagery inviting us into the complexity of a young speaker's life. Such skill and compassion are hallmarks of C.D. Wright's work. I'm grateful for "Blazes," and for all her remarkable poetry.



## OUR DUST

I am your ancestor. You know next-to-nothing about me.

There is no reason for you to imagine the rooms I occupied or my heavy hair. Not the faint vinegar smell of me. Or the rubbed damp of Forrest and I coupling on the landing en route to our detached day.

You didn't know my weariness, error, incapacity, I was the poet of shadow work and towns with quarter-inch phone books, of failed roadside zoos. The poet of yard eggs and sharpening shops, jobs at the weapons plant and the Maybelline factory on the penitentiary road.

A poet of spiderwort and jacks-in-the-pulpit, hollyhocks against the tool shed. An unsmiling dark blond. The one with the trowel in her handbag. I dug up protected and private things. That sort, I was. My graves went undecorated and my churches abandoned. This wasn't planned, but practice.

I was the poet of short-tailed cats and yellow line paint. Of satellite dishes and Peterbilt trucks. Red Man Chewing Tobacco, Black Cat Fireworks, Triple Hut Creme Soda. Also of dirt dobbers, nightcrawlers, martin houses, honey, and whetstones from the Novaculite Uplift. What remained of The Uplift.

I had registered dogs 4 sale; rocks, dung,  
and straw.

I was a poet of hummingbird hives along with  
redhead stepbrothers.

The poet of good walking shoes—a necessity  
in vernacular parts—and push mowers.

The rumor that I was once seen sleeping  
in a refrigerator box is false (he was a brother  
who hated me).

Nor was I the one lunching at the Governor's  
mansion.

I didn't work off a grid. Or prime the surface  
if I could get off without it. I made  
simple music  
out of sticks and string. On side B of me,  
experimental guitar, night repairs and suppers  
such as this.

You could count on me to make a bad situation  
worse like putting liquid make-up over  
a passion mark.

I never raised your rent. Or anyone else's by God.  
Never said I loved you. The future gave me chills.  
I used the medium to say: Arise arise and  
come together.

Free your children. Come on everybody. Let's start  
with Baltimore.

Believe me I am not being modest when I  
admit my life doesn't bear repeating. I  
agreed to be the poet of one life,  
one death alone. I have seen myself  
in the black car. I have seen the retreat  
of the black car.

ON A FIRST READING OF "OUR DUST"

After I received the kind invitation to choose a poem of Carolyn's and say a few words about it for FIELD, I picked up *Steal Away*, which was lying to hand, and opened it, at random, to "Our Dust"—a poem which for some reason I had not known.

It took hold of me immediately—its directness, moral and spiritual aliveness, contradiction, clarity, intimacy, and the wryness and unassuming strength of its tone. The honesty of the address struck me as not just rare but unique—the *I* without vanity or self-display. (The poem is not asking us to dwell on the poet. To look at the poet, yes—as our present exemplum—but not to pay the poet any lingering attention. This is one of the things I most deeply admire about C.D.'s work—the counter-exhibitionistic strength it has, the desire to show the reader something, not show the reader the poet reacting to something.)

Right away I loved the dishevel of the line-lengths, and the look of organic structural necessity of the stanza-lengths, which I took in as roughly similar (turned out to be 8 lines, then 8, 8, 7, 4, 7, 9, 6, 6). The music felt hand-made and also elegant in a down-home way. I trusted the syncopated balance of the internal rhyme, and the unfurling sentences (and the phrases which add interruption). The alliteration drew me back to the mattery plain-talk of Old English (and its sense of connection to the land and to other solid things). The brand names served as sea-anchors counter-balancing the lyric propulsion, and as touchstones of my childhood Five & Dime sense of reality.

As always, I was drawn to C.D.'s anti-bragging, and to her beauty of language and the concise richness of grammar which are grounded by the places the poem establishes as its home—roadside zoo, weapons plant, penitentiary. I trusted the trowel and I trusted the handbag it was in, and I trusted the self-judgments. The truths stood up through the lines. I felt the justice of Red Man and the Novaculite Uplift sharing their stanza. The voice had no fluff, no side, no sense of manipulation or calculation. It was itself. Dogs 4 sale were dogs 4 sale. I was deep inside the plain beauty and gorgeous

dry intelligence of a C.D. Wright poem. Sensual, effortlessly super-smart and available, surprising, and holy with originality.

And it picked up tempo. *I was, I was, I was*—yes, yes, yes. But the rumor of what I was—that was false. (The poem has turned.) And the other rumor—false. And I wasn't this, or that, or that. The voice rises a little, like a prophet's.

I never raised your rent. Or anyone else's by God.  
Never said I loved you. The future gave me chills.

And the voice lowers its register again, not proud. Not trying to look good. The tone is to me heartbreakingly frank, "disinterested" (in the Jane Austen sense). So unassuming yet with absolute authority. No illusions. No special claims. Just the bare embrace of the outline of the human, physical birth and death. The common lot. The night.

Such plainness, in the presence of such ardor—such core humility—is shocking to me. This is our radical, singing. If this poem were an ark I would get in it. Carolyn Wright's art is an ark we are so lucky to be in. She doesn't pretend to be speaking for us, or as us—she just does so. She is with us at the end of the poem, she does not abandon us, she is ours, she is our best, she is standing with us seeing the retreat of the hearse with her body in it. It grows smaller and smaller. She is alone in it. She gives it to us from at our side. Her poem holds us in our holding of it. In our holding of her, she holds us.



## CRESCENT

In recent months I have become intent on seizing happiness: to this end I applied various shades of blue: only the evening is outside us now propagating honeysuckle: I am trying to invent a new way of moving under my dress: the room squares off against this: watch the water glitter with excitement: when we cut below the silver skin of the surface the center retains its fluidity: do I still remind you of a locust clinging to a branch: I give you an idea of the damages: you would let edges be edges: believe me: when their eyes poured over your long body of poetry I also was there: when they laid their hands on your glass shade I also was there: when they put their whole trust in your grace I had to step outside to get away from my cravenness: we have done these things to each other without benefit of a mirror: unlike the honeysuckle goodness does not overtake us: yet the thigh keeps quiet under nylon: later beneath the blueness of trees the future falls out of place: something always happens: draw nearer my dear: never fear: the world spins nightly toward its brightness and we are on it

ON "CRESCENT"

C.D. Wright's prose poem "Crescent" closed out her short book *Tremble*, which was a sort of hinge moment for her. No longer in print as an individual volume (a selection from it is included in *Steal Away*), *Tremble* preceded by only two years her landmark book-length work *Deepstep Come Shining*, which announced a dramatic new phase in her writing—a turn from her earlier books of discrete lyrics normally in the vernacular into a series of more ambitious book-length projects and collaborations marked by a more operatic blending of high and low diction, of poetry, essay and reportage.

It opens:

In recent months I have become intent on seizing happiness: to this end I applied various shades of blue: only the evening is outside us now propagating honeysuckle:

Wright's use of the colons creates a sense of invocation or prayer, but it is an invocation not to processes logical or previously known. Blue is a color normally associated with sadness or melancholy or contemplation; the notion that various shades of blue would assist in "seizing happiness" feels counter-intuitive. Also the speaker is foiled by the evening itself—normally the poetic figure of "evening" might reasonably be expected to support the distribution of more blue, but not here.

But the speaker of the poem knows she is moving in a world which does not understand her and may resist her desires to reconfigure its responses to her:

I am trying to invent a new way of moving under my dress: the room squares off against this...

The erotic and private and personal (the way one moves under one's dress) is opposed to the public space of the "room." Wright further questions the worth of even beautiful superficial circumstances:

...when we cut below the silver  
skin of the surface the center retains its fluidity: do I still  
remind you of a locust clinging to a branch: I give you  
an idea of the damages: you would let edges be edges

The surface world then is seen as only the “edge” of what has a deeper depth, a slant-like reference to the title of the poem “Crescent,” which also stands for not an object itself but only the visible part of a larger unseen whole. Wright further sees those edges—the surface world—as the evidence of the damaged unseen, the unseen that she as a poet wishes to explore and illuminate.

Then, about halfway through the poem, a sly series of lines, though still following the “prose” mode by appearance, jars the reader into closer attention by where they break:

believe me: when their eyes poured over your long body  
of poetry I also was there: when they laid their hands on  
your glass shade I also was there: when they put their  
whole trust in your grace I had to step outside to get  
away from my cravenness...

That the metaphor for poetry is erotic here is not accidental; the way one trips over the expectation created by the line break on the word *body* actually *feels* erotic. The poem very quickly returns to a more prose-like feeling with lines that do not break on significant words, but there is still some slippage embedded in the grammar, for example in these lines:

...we have done these things to  
each other without benefit of a mirror: unlike the hon-  
eysuckle goodness does not overtake us: yet the thigh  
keeps quiet under nylon...

The break on “to” is completely ordinary, and the hyphenating of *honeysuckle* slows the mind down just enough to get confused as to its part of speech—at first one wants to make it the adjective to “goodness,” but once you read to the end of the phrase you realize



that is not the role it plays in the sentence and must backtrack. There is once again a playful break on *thigh*, and the reader discovers on the next line that the speaker has indeed perhaps been successful in inventing a new way to move under her dress.

At the conclusion of the poem, “the future falls out of place,” and by this we are meant to understand that the lack of fixity the speaker was invoking at the beginning of the poem has either come to pass or is revealed as the true condition of the physical world. The closing of the poem embraces this promise of any crescent—that all crescents in the sky will wax and wane, the whole will indeed be seen, but more than that: we ourselves are within the reality of the crescent, that we too will be illuminated whole and that to be along for that transformative ride is a magnificent thing.

## OBSCURITY AND REGRET

The hand without the glove screws down the lid  
on the jar of caterpillars, but the apple trees  
are already infested. The sun mottles  
the ground. The leaves are half-dead.  
A shoe stomps the larvae streaming  
onto the lawn as if putting out a cigarette on a rug.  
It was a stupid idea. It was a stupid thing to say,  
the thought belonging to the body says to its source,  
stomping on the bright green grass as it spills its guts.

CONSOLATIONS AND REGRETS

*ShallCross* is C. D. Wright's first posthumous book (it may not be the last); it's also one of her best, and if you read it from cover to cover you will find most of the themes and approaches for which her poems are usually praised. It holds, for example, poems of informal, exuberant, sensual invitation, and poems that feel like quoted speech; many pages incorporate Southern speechways, defending their speakers, and their nonstandard English, as democratically authentic—these selves are good as any self. *ShallCross* also keeps up a complicated, mutually nourishing interaction with photography in general, and with the work of Wright's friend and collaborator, the photographer Deborah Luster, in particular. The book includes very long lists; very short lyric; fragments of stories without an entire story; and attention to the tough and sometimes self-destructive lives of other artists, as in the foldout catalog poem entitled "from The Obscure Lives of the Poets," or in the even more exciting, more diffuse, title poem, which incorporates (or simply is) a lament for the singer and songwriter Vic Chesnutt: "Now who will make the record of us / Who will be the author / Of our blind and bilious hours / Of the silken ear of our years" (140). So many parts of *ShallCross* do, clearly and proudly, what Wright's fans first seek in Wright's poetry, the qualities—thematic, emotional, tonal—that come up immediately when we introduce her body of work.

And then there are the parts of *ShallCross* that appear to contain none of those things: the poems that are not exuberant, not obviously Southern, neither like photographs, nor like travelogues, nor yet like Whitman's democratic catalogues, nor yet like post-avant-garde fragments, nor even much like roots-rock, blues or bluegrass. And yet these poems sound like Wright, and demonstrate her powers, nonetheless. One of those poems is "Obscurity and Regret." It's a poem of dejection, of literally feeling crushed; it also recalls the broken-up, kaleidoscopic, but nonetheless sometimes sexy space of Wright's first book-length poem, *Just Whistle* (1992), in which "the body," along with other actors denominated by "the," had their say independent of proper nouns. Around "the thought" and "the body" here, though, Wright arranges the distress of an over-fertile, too-bright

temperate summer, a counterpart to Wallace Stevens's disappointed autumn: "You like it under the trees in summer," Stevens wrote in "The Motive for Metaphor," "Because everything is half-dead. / The wind moves like a cripple under the leaves / And repeats words without meaning."

When Wright sounds like Stevens it means that something has gone bleakly wrong. What is amiss for Wright, for the trees, for the poem? She has tried and failed to foil caterpillars; perhaps they are gypsy moths, a serious problem in southern New England, where Wright lived. She has also tried and failed to take back something said, as human beings might try and fail to take back industrial civilization, which spreads exotic species and other blights from climate to climate, tree to tree. Poets can decry such events, but not reverse them, especially not if they write poems as limited and self-enclosed as jars, like Stevens's jar in Tennessee (and perhaps all poems are so enclosed, though Wright's other work says it isn't so). This living hand, this screwed-up jar, jarringly enough, makes nothing happen: the exotic species, the infestation, the moths, are already loose, and the trees may be half-dead.

Wright has written a brief poem about the impotence of poetry, the impotence of the creative temperament, to solve the problems that vex us, from climate change to discord between friends to one gauche remark, one green ichor stain, one death on the grass, like a serpent in Eden, like sin. She rewrote the Eden story throughout her career (see "Approximately Forever," for example) but usually she made it a fortunate fall; who wouldn't want to bear fruit, to inhabit the body fully, to enter into the contract by which "thought" and "body," "body" and "source," agree to change, to take risks in the visible world? Usually, too, in Wright, surprising honesty—the spilling of guts—is a good thing. Here, though, the fall is really a fall—the caterpillars fall from the tree, they look as if they had fallen out of the jar, the "idea" (a thing seen, a thing visualized, a thought made solid) was a letdown, the thing said should not have been said.

The poem has no "I," no "you," no "we," not even "she" or "he": no person gets to be whole here. Instead, the parts of "the body," act all too independently, at cross-purposes, no more organically linked than a jar and its lid. The spirit of this moment is the



spirit of a humanity that has already screwed it all up; it is *l'esprit d'escalier*, the spirit of a mistake-maker, an original sinner, for whom, whatever the sin—introducing exotic species? inventing steam power? making an untoward remark at a garden party?—it is already too late.

We do not know quite what happens next; nor should we—that's how this kind of lyric, this kind of compromise between what we already know and what we cannot know, must work. That compromise is one way that the poem seems, after all, characteristically hers. Another, harder to spell out, lies in its rhythms, where terms for conventional meters will not take us far: is that a hexameter at the end? Is "half-dead" a spondee or a trochee? The rhythms are, by and large, densely irregular, the middle spits spondees, the last three lines bear thirteen syllables each without repeating meter, and that first line is... a perfect iambic pentameter, as if to play a kind of bait-and-switch on readers expecting regularity. That's a characteristic Wright move too.

Finally "Obscurity and Regret" feels like a Wright poem because it feels like a mirror image of a Wright poem; it feels like the most common, most exemplary, Wright poems (from "The Ozark Odes" to "Key Episodes from an Earthly Life" to "ShallCross") with their attitude reversed. This poet of smartly visceral, vividly celebratory embodiment has written a lonely poem where bodies have already failed, a poem whose near-despair, whose self-rejection, uses the same tools—the crunchy irregular lines, the "the" for body parts, the photographic details—she developed for confident protest and for cautious affirmation. It belongs, then, not only among the Stevensian poems it echoes but also among sad poems, doubt-eaten poems, by other great poets of immanent bodily happiness: Whitman's "Responded," Frank O'Hara's "Essay on Style." Our knowledge that such poets can get bleak or sad, that they can disappoint themselves, that they can express their own alienation from whatever usually delights or consoles or propels them, helps us believe them when they return to their usual, more inviting, modes.

For Wright those modes work best when they seem shared: when their consolation involves quotation or conversation, joint effort or social solidarity. You can find a pure example of that mode in the terrific "Poem Without Angel Food," from an earlier sequence in



*ShallCross*, and it is the obverse for which "Obscurity" looks like the reverse: "Poem Without Angel Food" is a poem about, and for, and almost spoken by, a "we" who are also an "I" who are also a family who are also a body of readers who could really help one another out. Here it is:

Well, a great many things have been said  
in the oven of hours. We have not been  
shaken out of the magnolias. Today was another  
hard day. And, tomorrow will be harder. Well,  
that sounds like our gong. But we'll have  
the boy's birthday and we will have  
music and cake. Well, I will think only  
good thoughts and go up and talk to the rock.

We have the speech of hardworking, well-meaning, Americans, probably Southern and probably parents and probably older than many of Wright's readers now; they or she plan a party for the next day, to celebrate children, without "angel food," meaning both that their food is nothing fancy and that they eat only food fit for homely human beings. Speaker and listener are no angels—they live on this Earth, and Wright has written a poem about how to live on Earth, with the shortages and built-up frustrations and physical discomforts that Earth entails ("I am the necessary angel of Earth," says one of Stevens's figures, "Since in my sight you see the earth again"). The solecisms, the hesitation forms, characteristically prevent overseriousness: "And" with a comma, "Well" at the end of a line, and then backing into the final sentence, which does not sound "specific" or detailed or conventionally "poetic" in any way.

The poem sounds like Wright for some of the same reasons that "Obscurity" sounds like Wright: pieces of story without the whole story, a photovoltaic vividness in the details, irregular scansion with plenty of spondees, ease without cliché. But it also exemplifies—as "Obscurity" could not—some of the reasons that so many people who do not read poetry constantly, who have not read (say) Oppen, or Lisa Robertson, read and recommend Wright: it is a poem of soli-

clarity, both with her readers and with the people whose houses are like nests in magnolias, who call their son or their friend's son "the boy," who have and say they have "hard days," who resolve to "think only / good thoughts."

"Poem" could be quoting a lot of Southern grandmothers (though not mine), a lot of mothers, as well as some fathers. This side of her work has inspired, or grounded, younger poets of Southern ventriloquism, from Atsuro Riley to Nickole Brown. But it's not ventriloquism, not dramatic monologue, exactly. Instead, it's a kind of collective speech, for an "I" who is also a "we," on a long day: we feel half-baked, we have not lost our perch. We may have been rung off-stage prematurely: that gong is less Yeats's Byzantine disc than it is the signal from *The Gong Show*, though most of all it is an homely dinner gong.

Wright has worked into her poem—I hope I have just shown—any number of sampler clichés, any number of speechways and folkways that are, literally, very conservative; some of them are, in the literal sense of the phrase though not the political one, religious-conservative. To rely on a rock is to trust God and Christ (Matthew 7:24-25). Yet Wright is conserving, or preserving, language that we might also call radical: it gets dirty, it comes up from below. She has written a poem of resolution, of reconciliation, that is also a poem of defiance, a poem of this world ("music and cake") that also hopes for the next (for the rock). She has made what the classicist W. R. Johnson called in the 1980s a lyric of first-person plural: it lets us feel that we have something in common, without turning us into abstract representatives of one interest, one idea.

And it knows—Wright knows—that such a project, taken too earnestly or too far, fails as art: nobody can really "think only good thoughts." The point is to try—and who has not tried? Who wouldn't want a poetry that was at once disjunctive and ringing, part gospel and part post-avant, a poetry built from crisply observed bits that fit together no worse and no better than life does, with a red thread running through it of quoted speech? Who wouldn't want humor in it, along with some acknowledgment—that's the line-and-a-half at the end—that humor, good cheer, optimism, and prophetic salvation in

this world will always fail? You can talk to the rock but the rock will not really reply. Yet you can keep listening, both to your own inward requirements (that is, to the tradition of voice we call "lyric") and to the language and sound of other people, who might have had thoughts, or days, that come close to your own.

UNCLE NEEDLE

Today my uncle gave me the death I always wanted.

He touched me with a couple needles  
and my arms went to the bed

and my legs felt like they went deeper  
into the ground two stories below.

I noticed half my life was floating  
in cotton. Almost all of life is floating

if you count the air beneath floors  
or the tar above earth.

For a moment my nose  
had to deal with so much violence

just there, in the air trying to reach me,  
that there was no time to think my violent thoughts.

And my uncle sat in a chair by the bed  
and thought tenderly of me—he didn't ask me to think,

to keep thinking. But there will be a next death.  
You can't hold a cut shut.

You can't stitch a heart into beating.  
Why can't everyone be more like uncle?

DECEMBER 29

I found myself unable to consume  
the scallops after reflection—  
their whole lives were  
eating and suffocating.

This is much sadder than tortured people—  
in extreme pain we leave our bodies  
and look down to commit the pain  
to memory like studious angels.

The waiter brought me two fortune cookies.  
One future was traumatic enough.  
I decided to open just one cookie—  
the one on my right side.

It said in blue on a thin white strip  
*You must learn to love yourself.*

\*

The cookie was much less sweet  
than my psychiatrist.

Earlier that day he said he was proud  
that as my tumors grow  
my self-loathing seems to shrink.

My teeth made the cookie into blades  
that cut my tongue, and I spat it out.

I was seized with a question for Dr. Possick,  
but he was on the other coast, fast asleep.



I would have asked  
*If all of me is the part that's loving  
what is left to love?*

\*

I was suddenly overwhelmed with certainty  
that the second cookie could answer my question.

I imagined the paper as a body—  
a second body for me,

baking in a clay oven  
half beneath it and half overhead.

I didn't open the cookie though.  
I have to grow up at some point—

my imagination can't always be kicking fate  
as if it were the floor at a stupid party.

\*

But when you decide someone has something to say,  
their silences speak to you too—

The cookie's clear wrapper had a rooster printed on it.  
The lamp's reflection made a little sun  
clutched by the talons, deep in the clay:

*What is left to love  
is the part of you that is already dead.*

\*

The dead part of me  
is very busy preparing heaven for the rest.

He envisions it as a dream cemetery:  
no rabbis, wildflowers and scrub everywhere,  
rolling hills with nothing marked,

computer chips clipped to the ears of the dead  
so that loved ones can visit the exact spot.

He is unskilled with his hands,  
but he's moneyed and shouts well.

It's hard to love people committed to projects:  
when I tell him he's abusing the labor

he smiles proudly and says *God can only do good,*  
*I can do good and bad.*

THE ER

I meant to stop at the deli.  
I meant to buy a box of pansies.  
I thought a birthday note  
for Kay would be enough.  
Ed's voice sounded like an envelope  
without a letter.  
His face keeps showing up when I rake leaves.  
The dog's body left an indentation  
as if he had just stepped out  
the way people do.  
I think a house wren is watching me  
drink my morning tea.  
In passing the east windows  
I stopped for the bloody dawn,  
so beautiful.  
Last night's rain  
in a shimmering puddle  
on the oval table.  
Did I mention the two chairs?  
Did I tell you there are sixty-eight needles  
in six white boxes  
on the bookshelf?  
How else does one live  
if not this way,  
looking out and in.  
When I buy eggs from my neighbor  
I can't wait to come home  
and hold the small blue one in my hands.

WOOD CAME DOWN THE RIVER

Wood came down the river and a house was built of it, a house by the river. A house of driftwood is opposed to its nature. Unlike driftwood, houses prefer to stay put. Houses set up house in a place where it is conceived that a house should be. But with driftwood one can never be sure. In a house of driftwood one lives among old departed currents that made the wood what it came to be. The drift though that held the wood together can always return to lead the wood away, the helpless wood.

## THE TURKEY IDEAL

The wind has gotten under the porch rug, wearing it like a buffalo skin. A jazz album goes flying down the street. It's not my job to catch it. I've had so many jobs. I worked in a car wash and ate nothing but hash brownies, and very often hit a bump in the road. I painted houses, with or without permission. Somehow I got older and drove cabs. My job yesterday was to drive through the town of Hadley. I stopped for four turkeys crossing the road single-file. The safety of the four turkeys was my job. I sat in my cab in the middle of the road and flashed the headlights at oncoming cars to warn them. The turkeys cared nothing about me. I was invisible to them, and that was right. My invisibility to turkeys has long been another of my jobs. I stood still, as per the requirements of employment, I gave wide berth to their passage into the turkey fields, which is their calling. They were the embodiment of the turkey ideal. And I was there to thank them, and flash my lights, as porch furniture went bouncing across our lawns in the great winds that sweep the future toward us. My job now is to be wind-blown. I drive directly below a bald eagle along the road that ends at the river. I'm keeping track of the eagle through the moon roof. I'm listening to my haircut rearrange itself in the wind.



KÜNSTLERROMAN

Sometimes I think it began with the impossible  
romance of an owl and a cat. The years my dad sang  
me to sleep. Or it began with the silence he left.  
Or it started with drawing butterflies I wanted  
to collect. I wanted to catalog beauty. Pin wings  
to a box. I wanted to be the kind of cruel  
people would understand. Or maybe it began  
in a medieval bestiary. How I learned about  
Myrmecoleons and felt the shape of my teeth,  
put my hand between my legs to check for sure.  
I recognized competing hungers. Or it began  
with little epiphanies welting my back. It began  
with a lesson—never throw a bible out a car window.  
Someone else teaches the places we can't reach—  
Jesus's dialogue red as a snake bite before it scabs.  
Or it began with moaned aubades at seventeen.  
Or before the moaning, with the rap at the window.  
Or before that, when I invented a vowel cipher  
for the ghosts in my basement. Or it all started  
with the boy who drowned in the lake named for him.  
The chill at my ankles always resembled a hand.  
Or it started with selenology, renaming the moon's  
gray seas with my own losses. Or it began by taking  
my nipple in my mouth and flicking it from rosebud  
to combustible red. Party trick. Sweet applause.  
By the time a man shadowed me off a train and another  
invited me into his car, they were already a repetition.  
It began when a man led me into the woods and asked me  
to imagine it—my picture on TV, my name droned  
on police scanners, my life significant. He already knew  
how white my bones could be, how flies can be mistaken  
for a black dress before they rise from a body.

ONE AFTERLIFE

*for Marcia*

Gladys Ione for lightning, thin ionic  
bands striking the pasture—sparks  
from hate and sparks from love, cinders  
in the air, afternoon thunder. You can see  
the tree line moving. A wing dips  
45 degrees then turns—my mother's face  
deep in wonder. Touch it for the luck.  
The angle, perspective, lines all there for time,  
as she happens, and her sisters—Jean, Billie,  
Lucy—and brother Ralph lean at once  
from a wide porch—here she is,  
Gladys, with that look, out of dust,  
out of the Horse Head Nebula, out.

## BLUE STAR

My wife wants me to let her go  
into fog we all must travel over stones  
wet and darkening but we have loved  
for half our lives, over the bridge, over

water, over everything. There are  
fish big enough to carry us.  
There is cold current. I can wait  
until she comes back.

I can sing in a way we usually do  
too high, broken, without faith.  
She wants to let me go. Spark

the water—something silver curves  
like brakes through forty years, dives  
and disappears.

WAKE UP YOU DEAD

Once a man sent me a valentine under the circumstance  
that he "found it on the floor & decided to send it," a circumstance

which required me to throw it away, just as I threw  
a book at John once to make him love me. Circumstances

shift, and today John's small baby who is my small baby ate  
a blueberry for the first time. Magic, under the circumstances.

It is time to vote for President again and I've watched a house  
be torn down brick by brick the past three weeks. These circumstances

feel connected but the reason sits shiva on the tip of my tongue. Like  
"as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" & the circumstances

on an exit ramp in Newark, NJ which led a man to hold HELP  
on a piece of cardboard. I didn't, given the car & the circumstance

& I'm sorry. Oh wake up you dead language, you who place a circle  
which is constant inside the blue heart of our stormy circumstance.

HELE IN C

Hush—hear the wave-lap, the hull-rime  
in *lullaby*. English spells for sleep  
rudder-cut the North Sea. (Dutch  
the hushed root.) Later turns in mother's tongue

to *lalabay*. English spells *force*  
by forcing C to cede sibilance. Little imp,  
it's late. You root, turn, touch: mother  
tongue a boondock song. Do loanwords

imply debt? *Sibile* fore-sings sybil.  
Music spells 4/4 C but sounds  
lapping waves in three: *lulla, lulla, lullaby*.  
*Bundok*, docked in English, implies a debt

of sound. Forces sheering homeward.  
Rudders cut the South Seas, spells  
for forcing sleep: the Sulu, the Celebes.  
Ply this hushed route; sleep sound.



## UNFINISHED POEM

We waste nothing, turn scraps  
into feasts of loaves & fishes: shredded,  
pot-pied, spaded into soy-struck rice. You  
had to teach me:

in shielding me  
from her own childhood my mother instilled  
a distaste for thrift, the scum  
boiled out of bone. For me she wanted  
abundance; if there were leftovers  
she ate them herself.

You learned economy  
from your father  
his childhood under occupation, the streets  
like nicked & blackened bones. His father  
hailed crates of matches  
& sugar deep into the country  
to trade for potatoes & rice.

The crates  
their own kind of abundance—a gift, extra  
rations from an Oregonian sergeant  
who didn't know what Nisei meant  
but recognized the authenticity  
of your Ojii-san's Portland accent.

One of those strange recursions of labor,  
of downturn & family history: Japanese,  
American. Japanese again.

Their neighbors carried  
pendants, kimonos, tea cups—anything  
pretty & useless & hard  
to find out in the country whether  
there was a war on or not. The rice had to last  
for weeks. Still

he managed to scrimp for an LP  
the only one he could get hold of: Schubert's  
Symphony No. 8 in B minor, The Unfinished,  
a work no one in his household  
particularly liked, but which they listened to  
again & again, since it was all that was left  
after the world had ended.

SINGING LESSON

They call themselves  
the monks of the self

In snowy  
terrain they paint  
my body  
with notes  
and teach it  
pain  
from two or three scores  
I try to escape  
Walking running  
cuts short my breath

Unrecognizable  
and far  
from me  
the sound  
of my voice  
begins

## THE TIME HAS COME

To catch a lion  
with a butterfly net and then be  
afraid of him

Meanwhile I'm freezing  
and the lion is sick  
All the friends acquaintances  
and strangers  
inhabiting me—  
who indeed has a self for herself—  
will pester me  
as soon as he's dead  
I hear them coming  
I must get dressed

*translated by Sara Edinger*

VINE

I must have watched it twenty times  
Before they took it down.  
The one in the park on a bench  
Where the kid in a blue hoodie  
Shoots himself in the chest with a gun  
He's showing off to his unseen friend  
Who is giggling then gasps and a shriek  
Starts up in her throat but stops.  
The tock! and the little hole flapping open  
In his shirt where the blood will leak out  
In tendrils that climb down the twin posts of his pants—  
But not yet. *Not yet.*  
I must have watched it twenty times,  
Studying the shadows, the shape of a cloud,  
Trying to imagine my way into those six seconds  
Thrown up on the Internet that morning  
Before finally giving up and returning to my book.  
One of the Penguin anthologies from the seventies  
With a short piece from a dour Swedish poet  
That had the word *abeyance* in it and black trees;  
At the end, a long prison wall receding  
Into the vanishing point, and if I'm not mistaken  
The strangled cry of a bird  
A passerby hears and moves on.



A SPACE TELESCOPE TILTED AT US

*for Kiki Petrosino*

friend tumbles darkly to my orbit  
and I adjust my course    of course friend  
we can spin together    plutonic  
in our excess    our aberrations  
welcome as dandelions    their white

puff heads break in our breath    propagate  
themselves    but you are their engine friend  
the engine of dark sublime eating  
scones when you want and watermelon

never    you once said to me    my heart  
even my wife beside myself with  
you saying to me *never* would you  
feed a child from your breast in public  
    knuckles white on the stroller handle

I held friend your words in my ears for  
some time and pain I can't place    my hands  
relaxed blood back inside them    we traced  
our shared path to a point    animals

despite ourselves and elliptical  
    I see I can't follow you    a square  
chasing a sphere I am missing some  
dimensions you've seen    some beyond    here  
I sit and grow wary and whiten

DELILAH WE WILL NOT BE FOR HIM

having here strapped taut across my chest  
this milky little man we've made    fat  
with consuming his mother daily  
    he comes to brief rest here against my  
empty chest    momentary headboard

I see a wispy crown    crush of cheek  
eyelashes collapsed beside a hint  
of nose    one peak of ear emerging  
    a quick snore of light and light and light

by this still light we cut and we tear  
what's excess of him    our son grown long  
in nail    he claws the breast he feeds on  
    my wife has bled terribly and will  
again for this peaceful *now* we have

stolen from the cries of *becoming*  
    every day a new power unfurls  
from his face    we see a man grow trapped  
in small perfect form    we dry hair we

cannot bring the scissors to it we  
cannot cut more than what we must we  
don't know the mechanism    might we  
clip his power this bright future we  
carry this son    forward straining he

THE PLAN

I won't have children, says the glaciologist in *Harper's*,  
I'll move up north. Me, I'm wandering Walmart, pregnant.

I buy a backpack, a flashlight. In a field next to the parking lot  
the bluegrass festival is ending. The men lean in,

one hand on another's back: *Or are you building  
on the sinking sand*. I want to add

my hand. Dinnertime we let the phone ring,  
we turn the ringer off. In the middle of the night a calling

circles the house: *who who who cooks for you—*  
I know it from books. The night divides in two.

## TOMORROWLAND

Family dinner night, and we are deciding what to save:  
polar bears or slipper limpets. Girls in Afghanistan

or the wolf. We can't save everything  
but the kids are ready

with their banks, the season's extra, the not-  
ice cream. How does the Afghan girl feel

to make our list? We bring more and more  
money to the table but the list outruns it.

My mother comes in from visiting a friend in hospice,  
sick from all the chemo. When I get whatever it is, she says,

I want you to do nothing. It's only May  
and already they've declared a statewide drought.

Yesterday I hiked over a river that was not there.  
Coral reefs, my son says, that's what I want

to save. And so we do. Whatever is happening to us  
is deductible. Silence of the was-river,

was-bear. In the movies everyone is building  
some kind of ark.

WHAT SEEMS LIKE JOY

how much history is enough history    before we can agree  
to flee our daycares    to wash everything away and start over  
leaving laptops to be lost in the wet along with housecats and Christ's  
own mother    even a lobster climbs away from its shell a few  
times a life    but every time I open my eyes I find  
I am still inside myself    each epiphany dull and familiar  
oh now I am barefoot    oh now I am lighting the wrong end  
of a cigarette    I just want to be shaken new like a flag whipping  
away its dust    want to pull out each of my teeth  
and replace them with jewels    I'm told what seems like joy  
is often joy    that the soul lives in the throat plinking  
like a copper bell    I've been so young for so long  
it's all starting to jumble together    joy jewelizing copper  
its plink    a throat    sometimes I feel beautiful and near dying  
like a feather on an arrow shot through a neck    other times  
I feel tasked only with my own soreness    like a scab on the roof  
of a mouth    my father believed in gardens    delighting  
at burying each thing in its potential for growth    some years  
the soil was so hard the water seeped down slower than the green  
seeped up    still he'd say *if you're not happy in your own yard*  
*you won't be happy anywhere*    I've never had a yard but I've had  
apartments  
where water pipes burst above my head    where I've scrubbed  
a lover's blood from the kitchen tile    such cleaning  
takes so long you expect there to be confetti at the end  
what we'll need in the next life    toothpaste    party hats  
and animal bones    every day people charge out of this world  
squealing    so long human behavior!    goodbye acres  
of germless chrome!    it seems gaudy for them to be so cavalier  
with their bliss    while I'm still here lurching into my labor  
hanging by my hair from the roof of a chapel    churchlight thickening  
around me    or wandering into the woods to pull apart eggshells  
emptying  
them in the dirt    then sewing them back together to dry in the sun



MOTHER TONGUE

My wife speaks a tongue  
that isn't hers, tone-deaf

and atomic, a language  
with words like 'barricade'

and 'moat.' Hers is wordless,  
as we understand words,

composed of pictures,  
brush-strokes, sounds—

sounds I still mangle  
after all these years.

At night, it's morning  
where her mother lives.

She calls to catch up  
with her other life

in the village of black  
water, blue hills.

I hear her real voice,  
her true self speaking.

She returns to our room  
strange, a stranger.

She slides into bed,  
I rub her left hand—

and utter the words  
we pretend to understand.

FAREWELL (*DER ABSCHIED*, 1913)

—August Macke, 1887-1914

Wherever you are you are somewhere on earth.  
Whoever you are you are someone saying farewell.  
Look how light floods through the doors of the station  
outlining dark forms gathered in family groupings,  
the children standing small and bewildered,  
the mothers clutching a handkerchief or a letter,  
the young men turning their faces away, the pair  
bent over drinks at the bar. Wherever you are,  
the scene plays out mutely, even the dog keeps quiet,  
the train will arrive, people will board and depart.  
Those who have dressed for the occasion in hats  
and long coats step forward, putting all in order.

DAS ENDE (1918)

—after George Grosz

A man sets forth into an empty city with India ink, pen, and brush.

*People pass by one another . . . empty spaces remain where they have been:*

matrons who scuttle by with tiny dogs on leashes, furtive bankers clutching their canes behind them.

*Everybody around me was afraid.*

Six strokes of his brush make two streets converge; three tangents, a neighborhood of dense-packed buildings. From the alley a wolf-man slinks.

He adds four lines: a window: a space for sex, flick-knives, suicide by hanging. A wall of windows. Behind one, faintly, a baffled cartoon face.

In a style copped from urinals he appears in the city square, bald scalp on a stack of polygons. Death leaps to his shoulders, clutches him like a chimp.

Wind whistles through the circle in Death's parietal.

The man thickens the lines, brush angrier now. The brow knots, the penis stiffens. Death plants a kiss in his trembling neck.

*I would make art they would turn their eyes away from.*

*I was afraid too, but not afraid to resist this fear.*

STAY ALIVE

For what? To catch the old bricks  
smoking cigarettes?

To carry love's root  
like a blade being driven

into the night sky  
by an angry God?

The anthill has gone wrong.  
Still, there are lit coals

in rocking chairs and beds  
scattered all over the earth,

and I'm falling asleep  
with your girlhood house

like a chess piece  
in my hand.

THE OTHER SIDE

The way motel walls are  
so thin that you hear

the polyglot of lovers  
the exchange of groans

the sleepers turning  
over in the cheap beds

the late-night  
flushes—there is a thin

wall between being old  
& the personal death that's

just on the other side,  
but at 78, I instead hear

music from that other side—  
a low thrill, some song—

familiar, more than one voice  
when there is a voice,

& I begin to hum too.



ALL TOGETHER, ON THREE

A little punch in the head  
never hurt anyone wearing a helmet or falling  
down an elevator shaft and therefore distracted  
from the pain of the pugilistic weather  
around this place. One day it's raining haymakers,  
the next, snowing jabs, and that's just romance.  
What about all the people living in the woods  
since the Great Recession gave their houses away  
like socks at Christmas to strangers? I see  
their blue tarp mansions around the country  
just off on-ramps and wonder who chose  
that light shade of blue for tarps or knew  
to invent the wake-up call or was the first  
to yodel when he couldn't feed his children,  
under the theory that art sustains? You're my team,  
I want to tell them, that my family  
three hundred years ago and two and one  
and for a long time after  
were dirt poor, meaning they didn't own dirt  
or dust or lint, they owned a hole in the roof  
handed down from generation to generation,  
but my saying that wouldn't buy anyone  
baloney sandwiches, so I cut straight  
to the meat aisle and follow up  
with bread and cheese and leave  
a few brown bags not far from where I know  
they'll vanish within minutes, as demanded  
by The Church of It Could Be Me. Sixty-two percent  
of what I do is motivated by the faith  
that I'm not actually who I think I am  
and you're probably far more amorphous  
than your stunning abs suggest and so  
helping you is helping me is helping Shirley  
is helping Pete in a great big circle  
or dodecahedron of really practical steps

to take to get to the unknown end  
of this all, which I think  
is just a whisper but wouldn't mind  
if a band played spirituals on-and-on.  
The last time someone told me people need  
to fend for themselves, I stole his Jag  
and had it car-crushed with all his golf clubs  
inside and gave him a can-opener and a peck  
on the cheek. So this is what it feels like  
to be a Republican, I remember thinking,  
and ordered a vodka martini with not one  
but two thousand olives to lay-in provisions  
for the long trek we're always in the middle of  
if you agree life is far more a Mobius strip  
than a strip tease.

*Peter Leight*

REUNION OF THE CLASS OF THE PAST

When the bell rings we're in a room on one side of the corridor  
facing the other side,  
face to face,  
as if we're looking for each other,  
what I like about rooms is that they're re-used or re-occupied, as long  
as there's a room you can return to it  
like a kind of perspective that allows you to disappear gradually.  
And the board,  
as long as there's a board you can erase everything,  
knocking the erasers together like a kind of applause,  
everything that's written is a cloud of white dust.  
We're moving our lips together,  
breathing in  
and not breathing out,  
touching each other,  
not physically,  
that's not what I mean,  
I think there's some detention involved,

the clock on the wall has stopped, the hands flattened against the wall like espalier or single plane training,

I mean if you think of it as a ship

it's still unloading.

Sometimes we split into groups the way you take something apart in order to put it back together again,

not abandoning each other,

not at all,

we're still passing notes,

the ones we left inside.

There's a stapler in case we need to attach something to something else.

When you sit down it doesn't matter where you sit because everybody is sitting next to everybody else,

holding hands for a minute then letting go,

as in Red Rover,

reading and re-reading the way oil pressed out of nuts or olives is extra virgin

and then merely virgin.

It's the same assignment,

I think we're being repetitive,

as if we're looking for extra credit.

Taking notes in our spiral notebooks in order to have something to save.

This is what we're studying: the lips on our faces, the shape of our breasts, the circumference of our thighs,

if you think of it as a ship

only the cargo is different.



VIAL

I was having blood drawn again, undergoing testing for my mysterious ailment. The phlebotomist and I inhabited the usual mix of small talk and silence—then she giggled. *What is it?* I said. *It's just, isn't this strange?* she said, holding up a vial of my blood. *To see what you are made of, in the hands of a stranger?*

*Totally,* I said. *I always thought that was weird, but I never said anything because you're so professional. You act like it's no big deal.* *No, yeah,* she said, gazing at the vial. *It's fucking wild. Your mom is in here, your dad, your future kids. Your habits, your secrets.*

*I feel like your job is one of the realest jobs there is,* I said. *All this for fourteen dollars an hour,* she said. I wasn't sure what to say next. Money issues tend to make me uncomfortable. So, she said, *you want to party?* She took off her gloves, hit the lights, uncapped the vial containing my blood, and took a sip. The needle was still in my arm, but the hose was disconnected so my blood dripped onto the floor. She grabbed the hose, put it to my lip. *Try some,* she said. *No, no,* I said. *It was great to meet you, but—*

*Listen,* she said. *I know your type. I've tasted you. So just do what I say, you dirty dog. Take this terrible dream out of my head. Take this terrible dream, and suck on it.*

IT HAS BEEN, YES

We ease into abstract wicker chairs  
to discuss the latest hailstorm.

The noble dead within our bodies flip over  
as we sip from high voltage jars.

The sounds of all the fallen trees replay  
as a children's choir or dawn sitar.

Our toes probe the softening ground.

There is usually some postcard or parcel yet to arrive—  
I like to think—  
not to mention the sure-flying castles.  
Blame the phantom canons they get lost.

New buffalo roam the plains. My dear, you end up shooting them  
and only stop when one dies with its tongue  
on the back of your hand.

At this point, you head back.  
Actually, you sprint.

I've been digging a trench with the shovel you gave me.  
The moment you show up, a little dirt flies in your face. You go to  
pieces.

Come inside, I say. I've got a nice time capsule I've been saving.

The night I can't forget, neither of us showered or tried to look like  
anybody else.

The radio station must have canceled its weekly pledge drive.  
We cooked a big meal and grooved around the kitchen

like the rarest amateurs on earth.

## EPISODE

At midnight in a dirt parking lot  
dust won't settle

She resists running through hedges  
like a baited bear

Too late for pianissimo therapy  
and passionflowers

Something tells her lungs  
don't wait  
go now

hurry

\*

Witches jostle around perspiring grapefruit juice

Pricks lick themselves in distant lairs

Carnations rot in a fountain

This afternoon she watched the tip of a screw  
disappear twist by twist

into wood

and felt the grain  
make

room

\*

Her cells speak from across the river  
with megaphones

Each wants  
its own bunk in the ship  
in a bottle

Save them move them they are tired of each other

Them's the rules

Anubis?

\*

There must be a beach  
where no road leads

a place as yet unnamed

Iridescent bricks protect it  
from far away

Low and high tides don't exist

Here a line in sand will keep

forever

CIRCLE OF FIFTHS 7

To achieve disease by haunted blanket  
we cover ourselves in yellow glory.  
Vast fields of goldenrod stitch the eye. Ope.  
Our first vaccines were not harmless but pus.  
Finer pushers than I have lost moment-  
um. I will not give you your drugs. Go home.  
O brief architect of light! O firework!  
O rain on tin, far gunshot, apathy!  
What needleworks hang low on Memphis walls  
and how many, many gods of the dead?



## CIRCLE OF FIFTHS 9

Currents ferry our trash to ocean hearts.  
The sleepless careen through dead-eyed waters  
late-stage living having siphoned all bloom.  
Play cancer. Life ain't health. Now ante up.  
Each unthinking unthought, an icepick tip.  
Glaciers bleed water. Shall we be released?  
The hope: bacteria will eat plastic.  
Prolonging us, ends ebb then re-arrive.  
To clean a fish—extract its business card.  
Vague forms will rise like tumors in the sea.

## CIRCLE OF FIFTHS 10

A seizure took him to the pool's floor. Blue.  
Panic is meek. What give we for godspeed?  
Disco traffic shoots light up the far walls.  
Big-eyed animals begging for morning.  
While absence makes art. While no one is found.  
*Grow* is what they dry-whisper to the dirt.  
*No*. What they dry heave into the bowl. Howl.  
Through thick darkness they dry hump like shovels.  
Like they're a stamp. Sealing him for travel.  
And the cried-out air goes red as sirens.

WOMAN 1 AS EXHIBIT

*Figure 1:* A CHILD foregrounded in chambray, fists knots in the grass. One white knee stained green.

*Figure 2:* Wood panel, 3 feet square, light grain pine, behind which THE FUTURE is obscured. There is a knock.

*Figure 3:* A pair of olive hands combing HER curls so gently it makes you hunger. Wind backwards. Watch it again.

*Figure 4:* CHILDHOOD as hopscotch panes cut neatly into dirt; a shelf of bitter oranges standing in for sky.

*Figure 4:* THE FUTURE wants to play too.

*Figure 5:* A synthetically darkened room. HER VOICE brings a bottle, spins it for the tall boy and the closet.

*Figure 6:* THE MOON as sickle, saw, wave on which she yaws. THE MOON is never a fingernail. Never truly full.

*Figure 7:* Blank. TV noises from THE FUTURE looping recorded scenes on a Delmonico '63.

*Figure 8:* A bright click of brass; sequence of breathing. You wanted a pastoral here.

*Figure 9:* You try to interpose a silo, a small plot of rhubarb. But THE FUTURE wants to see

*Figure 9:* Where evil begins. Thick fingers loading a handgun in the Damascene evening or

*Figure 9:* HER BROTHERS playing jacks in the courtyard where the gardener's wife kneeled, heaving, one palm trying to press the fresh red necklace back in, the other wiping, trying to wipe away each drop foxing the ivory tile or

*Figure 9:* The towhead BOY sleeping soundly.

*Figure 10:* Your distance to THE FUTURE seems ambiguous.

*Figure 11:* The CHILD turns from her frame and asks: have you made an amphitheater for echoes or a staging of the fall?

*Figure 11:* You wanted the blood cleaned up by breakfast, her face before the crows laid down their wings.

David St. John

PASTERNAK & THE SNOWY HERON

*It should have been easy to pull the plow from the marsh  
now the thaw has settled in but*

*It took two men & the plow horse all working together  
to finally clear it at last*

That was what Stella read aloud to me as she flipped through  
those letters her mother had sent

After her father died & her brothers left Moscow for Canada  
& she left finally too

& I should have known when she boarded *The Montrealer* in her  
Zhivago coat—all the rage that year

Yet never right for a winter in Baltimore—& she'd left behind

The photograph framed & nailed by our bed of Pasternak alone  
at his desk in Peredelkino

A room spare as a monk's filled with snow-lit light & on one wall  
you could make out the print of

Audubon's great snowy heron standing in marsh grass its beak  
poised at an angle of fierce attention

Its eyes locked in that acute otherworldly focus of Pasternak's own—  
& she left too on the maple table

The tiny framed snapshot I'd taken: Stella holding up her truly  
beloved companion      *My Sister, Life*

My only copy I'd given to her the very one she'd spirited away

## THE OLD WAVE

I listened as my old friend began reciting aloud the Sutra  
of the Old Wave—

She'd lived a monk's life at Tassajara & then Rome & Santa Fe  
& the joy she stitched around her

In the sounds of the Old Wave reminded me the way an elegant  
silence would cocoon her body

Easily as rain collects invisibly into a necklace of pools along a path  
after a spring storm

One night in Rome I photographed her standing in Piazza Santa Maria  
still & poised as the nearby Virgin

& only weeks later I gave her the print asking what she was thinking  
that moment & she

Looked entirely amused & I wasn't at all surprised she'd answered—  
*why just nothing*

Her laughter was origami unfolding or the steady pulse of Solovyov's  
mystic white lily

As her body was gathered up into the Sutra of the Old Wave



RENDER BILLOW

1.

Follow the mentor across a street,  
a jaywalk to rare steak and talk of pepper.

Crosswalk denied again upon return.  
My hesitation about headlights,  
but mentor goes. I do. Other side.

Then we hear a crack. Car halt.  
Follow the curious family to  
see the raised head of lying buck.

A teen parks his moped and embraces  
the buck into standing. (A risk  
taken with panicked tines. I feared.)

The deer, mouth dripping large  
red strings, walks towards us,  
startles and falls. A mother says,

"No, baby. It's okay. You have to go  
that way." We primates.

My passenger later says, "I'm sure  
he'll be okay." I say "internal injuries"  
and don't properly brake for a speed bump.

2.

My grandfather mumbles in Portuguese  
and every seventh word becomes  
blood in his mouth.

A two-day bloat from intestinal tumor  
pressures his lungs and esophagus.

I tell him to spit in the bag. Try to  
act normally as his words turn red.

My imperfect Portuguese  
presses against the ceiling.

We do not say that we do  
not know if he will live.

My mother, needing something  
to say, repeats to the nurse  
that his dentures are out.

3.

He is opened while everyone  
in a house is wearing red.

I wait as a team loses.

My grandfather lives.

I am offered and eat my first corned beef.

The mentor listens at the driveway.

4.

His colon will lead

to a bag for a while.

It leaks and infects.

Vacuum assisted

wound closure.

My mother siphons  
English into something  
to which he can nod.

5.

I forget the word for pillow.

What do you call this thing,  
I ask. He keeps his eyes closed  
and just says, ask correctly.

So I ask him to open his eyes.

6.

After I close my trunk,  
I see a doe cross

the street toward me. (At this  
house, we feed them sometimes.)

This is guilt. I walk to the patio  
and look back at her

until my knee hits rocking chair.

My human skin colors instantly.  
The doe safely noses the lawn.

AT THE LAKE HOUSE

Wind and the sound of wind—  
across the bay a chainsaw revs  
and stalls. I've come here to write,

but instead I've been thinking  
about my father, who, in his last year,  
after his surgery, told my mother

he wasn't sorry—that he'd cried  
when the other woman left him,  
that his time with her

had made him happier than anything  
he'd ever done. And my mother,  
who cooked and cleaned for him

all those years, cared for him  
after his heart attack, could not  
understand why he liked the other

woman more than her,  
but he did. And she told me  
that after he died she never went

to visit his grave—not once.  
You think you know them,  
these creatures robed

in your parents' skins. Well,  
you don't. Any more than you know  
what the pines want from the wind,

if the lake's content with this pale  
smear of sunset, if the loon calls  
for its mate, or for another.

## IMAGINARY FRIENDS

It started with the chicken toy—fuzzy, a foot tall,  
bad gift from my mother-in-law. When you pressed  
the button it flapped its stubby wings,

played a chorus of the Chicken Dance and wobbled  
around in a slow circle, green eyes flashing.  
It started by itself one night—I thought

it was a dream, those first two bars, accordion  
revving up before the tune kicks in. Half asleep  
I shuffled into Henry's room, the child

in his small bed, mouth open, too frightened to cry,  
eyes round and dark as bullet holes. In the morning  
over breakfast, I said Henry, that was crazy

with the chicken toy and he said *Yes, Koala did it.*  
*I told him you'd be mad.* And I said, who's Koala?  
*My friend. He lives in my room.* And when I lurched

across the hall a few nights later—dizzy, neck-hairs  
prickling, tinny manic squawk of the Chicken Dance,  
the toy's slow wobble, green eyes strobing

in the canted dark, I said Henry, you did it, right?  
You turned it on? And from his bed he said,  
*Dada, no—Koala did. I don't like that chicken.*

So I took the chicken toy outside and threw it in the trash.  
We put Henry's bed in the guest room after that,  
and later when I asked about Koala, Henry said

he'd gone away. I said, Do you miss him?  
And Henry, an only child then, said *Yes.*  
Well, I don't know much about the mystery, the world

not of the world. But lying awake as the snow ticks  
at the window, the radiator clanks, the cold night sleeps?  
All that it conjures. All that it summons from the dark.



HOH

Bunchberry groundcover, Sitka spruce, bigleaf maple, red alder,  
Western redcedar, lettuce lichen, Pacific tree frog & spotted owl—

we were all present there.

If there were two who want to be alone, or be together, or one  
alone & one together,

there is still a banana slug in whatever mood.

Nursery log suckles upspringing offspring trees.

*I don't want to be married anymore* echoes, although you'd think  
our boggy forest eats up sound.

Only the beginning of summer; but imagine marriage overrun-  
ning marriage, not convinced of dying back, everything fully soaked,

wild strawberry foliage assembled of drops of precip, not unlike  
used lipsticks partly reddening the ground & on bears' lips.

In all the greenness his young wife carries an infant on her nurse  
log.

Wild strawberries *Fragaria* receptacles achenes not seeds, every  
little twist of taste.

Really of the rose family.

Padded, moss sponging up anything you have to say, vows, rain  
rhythm, lowing in the depths of boats you know must be here.

Nor does she want to attract pity, rejection, but his return for  
now

& lifetime later, he instead of *I*; her, instead of *his*.

For the favor: thank her for the strawberries. She used to think this kitchenwork; the wild is not kitchens in the woods.

Alone but not without ferns, she's wearing mink-oiled boy's boots   cheap   worn raw-toed.

Ages of layers in a rainforest—how far down do you have to go before one thing is not growing on another?

They're small, smallish, tasty, but as big as they become here. We grow them & you have a few.

How palindromic, how over & under, it would feel

if she were to say: *Father of our child, I care for you.*

## IMPRINT

*At night the moon shakes the bright dice of the water . . .*  
The paper framing Louise Bogan's lyric "Elders"  
flaps like an old dish towel, the kind with "Monday"  
stitched on it, shaggy hole off-center,  
light weave defecting in the laundry,  
obedient to bleach.

*Voice ear-voice typeface voice*  
*font voice voiceprint*

Isn't it, isn't it that way, material—  
clothly?

*Roethke's ear heard her the man I met's ears*  
*heard Roethke I heard him say he was older than me*  
*we heard Phoebe's first cry*

If a word's a survivor like black burn atop a wick,  
you can fold severity in simple cotton,  
lunch money in an Egyptian hanky.

*Purple mulberry fallen into my walking white pocket*  
*Elderberries bowing along our countryside's short-line*

Elders are overheard overhead  
arc by tracks along an unofficial road,  
where you can find yourself with firm-fonted, flexing book.  
No one sends bough-lines to your device.

*She was the older*  
*Rilke's Lou Andreas-Salomé the longer-lived*  
*wild elders*

Clusters, their flower light.  
Black fruit breaks from the white.  
The Yolo's wheels go by. Birds' vocals.

From what may seem to be constant rain, sun  
in margins coming out. Horsetail for a bookmark.

ONE RIVER

1

In Kanji a window means *thinking*:  
windows carved on river-stones,  
on tumbled slabs of agate. A window  
hanging from a tree: *simplicity*.  
You think of your liver as an aqueduct  
disappearing into a geologic fold.  
Or a cloud, loaded with hail. So we die  
alone, you say. Someone goes out for Coke,  
ice cream. What else is there to know?

2

On hospice rounds you take turns staring  
into ruined mouths. The air in those rooms  
follows you out. What is it to watch a patient  
die from the virus you're living with?  
To watch her crush morphine to a powder  
with a tack hammer, add water, and pour  
the solution through a strainer? She'll  
dab her wound with a paintbrush until  
she's healed: a stone in a field of poppies.

3

In the backseat in the Sierras, sarong  
draped over your eyes, you think of those  
voweled s's: sinuous, cirrus, tortuous.  
And imagine the river's course—dark,  
brooding—the car burning inside the river.  
Then the water folds over, a curtain,  
and the other words float in: ribavirin,  
HCV-796, procrit, neupogen. It is Sunday.  
That complicated yes of the needle's prick.

## 4

When your patient dies you'll take the path  
 from sluggish headwaters to the petrol  
 mouth and lounge in mustard grass  
 spilling from burial wetlands. Listen to spark  
 plugs cuss over bone-white tenement  
 clotheslines as Oaxacan poachers pluck  
 mollusk shells beneath the 63<sup>rd</sup> Street culvert.  
 Watch the sadness of a thinning regatta.  
 This once, you will not want the sea.

## 5

Where are the words for grief? You imagine  
 a sea lion foraging near the tunnel of a power  
 plant, the ocean lunging behind it. A current  
 will lay its body beneath once-through-  
 cooling towers. There a boiler operator,  
 resting one boot on a rail, lights a cigarette,  
 calls his ex. You turn on the bedside lamp,  
 pulled into that world: a sea lion impinging  
 the tunnel screen, a man opening his mouth.

## 6

After your divorce your husband zigzagged  
 what were logging roads, chopped too much wood.  
 The Lutheran church's rooftop, snow-stricken,  
 was like two angelic hands fixed in prayer.  
 You remember that day, lit moths, like quartz  
 crystals strung from a lantern, climbing out of  
 the river, how you asked *were they born today?*  
 Quick the memory curls back, a thin stem. It sails on  
 like gold bars in neat coffin rows inside a boxcar.



7

Your kids like to look over large bodies  
of water. To get into their hearts there's this  
special knock. Hush, it's *special*. They'll  
jump in the lake once snow melts on the peaks.  
You don't mind watching them grow  
small, farther from shore. The lake drains  
into the south fork, and the south fork  
into the Clarks Fork in Paradise. One river  
receives that water, looking over the sea.

8

Mid-garden, where dandelions anchored  
their medicine roots, you've knelt too long,  
praying for your husband, your kids. The wind  
means nothing. Wood chips are arranged  
in their customary fever. Beyond the barbwire  
a deer, its foreleg hanging limp, useless.  
Those black eyes, hatching whatever light  
your body gives off, will close soon, unbeautiful  
where snowdrifts are always highest.

9

Once, through leaf-bud, the glacier's unmelting  
stare. Then the crickets like spark plugs,  
the grid of bonfires. What did you know  
about dying? You must have imagined children,  
your children's children. Or spoke of streams  
you'd crossed, bottom-silt a cloud behind you.  
Skies a January blue. Or in your grandma's  
lullaby, how the farmer waters his fields, clear  
ribbons of noise. The family has no vanishing point.

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*De Mis Vivos y Mis Muertos*, 2008

Electrical wire, paper, acrylics, fabric

143 x 84 x 84 cm

Saatchi Gallery, London



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